

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

Dr. C. Sharada,

Assistant Professor, Department of English,

Post Graduate College, Osmania University,

Secunderabad, Telangana, India

sharadasundar@yahoo.com

Imagery in Kofi Awoonor's poetry

Kofi Awoonor, A Ghanaian poet has etched for himself a significant place in the contemporary African poetry through his notable and remarkable contribution. His poems have been translated into various languages like Russian, French, Chinese and German. He spoke extensively on various topics and themes on international platforms. He believed in the idea - 'Nobody should be ashamed of where he comes from'. He felt that one should have inclination towards one's own tradition and culture and a strong sense of place. The symbolic significance of burying the child's umbilical cord in the very place it is born signifies the connectedness with the land he is born into. His poems speak of this connection and his love for his traditions and past.

Awoonor's poetry is replete with the themes like the conflict between the old (native) and new (western) cultures, his intense lamentations over the loss of old culture under the influence of western culture, his yearning to reach out to his roots, understand the connection between himself and his indigenous culture. His poems also speak of the conflict that educated African youngsters undergo caught enmeshed in the wilderness of colonized Africa. His lamentations are drawn on the traditional Ewe oral culture. His poems are like elegies mourning over the impact of colonialism on native African tradition and consciousness.

The present paper focuses on the different images that Awoonor had used in order to bring out the above mentioned themes. There is the imagery drawn from nature like birds, sea, stars, moon etc and on the other extreme, the religious imagery. He uses straight forward, sharp and almost precise imagery to suit the mood, tone and tenor of the poem.

In his famous poem 'Weaver Bird' from his first collection 'Rediscovery', the imagery is clear indication of the subtle entry of the White man on to the African land and how stealthily, he had made the African land his own.

The weaver bird built in our house
And laid its eggs on our only tree.(93)

Note the use of different images like, 'weaver bird', 'house', 'eggs,' 'tree' and 'nest' in the above lines. The weaver bird is the reference to the White man. Awoonor had employed the 'weaver bird' just to indicate how subtly, the bird stoops down and builds its 'nest' in the most intricate manner, almost impregnable. In the same manner, the White man too had flew down from the foreign land and settled on the African land.

The 'house' image used here is the reference to the land of Africa. 'Tree' image refers to the strong tradition and culture of Africa. The 'nest' is the image of White man's colony. Most interesting part is the building of the nest (colony) and laying of 'eggs'. Here, Awoonor intentionally had used the plural form of egg. The 'eggs' refer to the extension of the White colonies, the White man's administration, his law and order, power and religion.

We did not want to send it away.
We watched the building of the nest
And supervised the egg-laying. (93)

The ironical situation is that none of the natives had shooed the weaver bird,(the White man) away. Instead they welcomed , watched and supervised over the egg laying. This is a direct reference to the point that none of them had foreseen the repercussions of the entry of the White man and his building of colonies and spreading his administration and religion and crushing of their indigenous tradition and culture.

And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner.

Preaching salvation to us that owned the house.(93)

The weaver bird, who had rented the tree for some time had now donned the guise of the owner and looked down upon the native religion and culture. He started preaching salvation to the native and made him believe that salvation and redemption alone can save him from his sin.

And our new horizon limits at its nest.

The natives who were dominated in every sphere of their of lives had nowhere to turn and their horizon ended at the White man's culture.

We look for new homes every day,

For new altars we strive to rebuild

The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.

The religious imagery that Awoonor used in this poem are – 'salvation', 'altars' and 'shrines'. These lines depict how the White man had come seeking shelter, had now turned the tables and claimed ownership of the African land.

He preached Christianity and denounced the native religion. He didn't stop himself here, but went on calling the native rituals as empty and meaningless. The old temples, altars and shrines of the natives have been defiled , plundered and destroyed by the White man. The poet claims that his old and ancient culture has been tainted by the Weaver bird's 'excrement.'. The image of 'excrement' may sound coarse but it only reflects the poet's

repugnance towards the White man as the damage caused by him is irreparable. The once mighty and lush green tree of tradition and culture now is standing bare and dry shorn off the native consciousness.

Christopher Okigbo a Nigerian poet has written a poem, 'Limits X' to lament and mourn over the loss of native religion, consciousness, tradition and culture under the oppressive hand of the White man. He cries over the loss of indigenous culture under the adverse effects of colonialism. While, Awoonor has employed a 'weaver bird' as the image and symbol for the White Man, Okigbo has used 'eagles', the birds of prey as symbols for the White Man.

The eagles drew out of their scabbard,
Upon the tree trunks, as if on fire clay
Their beaks they sharpened;
And spread like eagles their felt-wings

And descended upon the twin gods of Irkalia (33)

The White men symbolized as the eagles, have drawn their talons and sharpened their beaks to descend upon the old shrines and defile them by destroying the indigenous religion of Africa. When Awoonor has used excrement as image for the 'bird droppings' that had tainted the tree of religion, Okigbo uses the violent images of 'eagles' with their wings spread swooping down on the shrine of Irkalia to defile it.

It's interesting to note that David Diop also had lamented and cried over the White man's enterprise in taking over the burden of cleansing the sin of the native African and making him shun his own tradition and embrace the new one. He had used the 'vulture' image for the White man. In his poem, 'Vultures' -

In those days
When civilization kicked us in the face
When holy water slapped our cringing brows
The vultures built in the shadow of their talons
The blood stained monument of tutelage

When Awoonor had used the imagery of the weaver bird, who very subtly, adroitly and skillfully weaves the nest that is his colony; the other two poets have used birds of prey like eagles and vultures to symbolize the plundering nature of the White man, who selfishly swoop and descend on the African land to transform it in all possible spheres.

In another poem by Awoonor entitled, 'Cathedral' he uses image of 'tree' to stand for the native religion.

They sent surveyors and builders
Who cut the tree
Planting in its place
A huge senseless cathedral of doom(144)

The White man had sent surveyors and builders to cut down the tree of religion and in its place he had built a cathedral of doom, He calls the white man's cathedral as doom as it has destroyed the African culture and religion. The tree image has been once again used here. We come across tree image in the poem, 'Weaver Bird'. There too, he had used the image to refer to ancient culture and tradition, and in this poem 'Cathedral' too he refers to the tree image which has been mercilessly felled by the white man, and in its place he had planted his own new culture. The religious imagery we come across here is 'cathedral' which stands for the new tradition in the place of their indigenous, old and ancient tradition.

It is interesting to note that Chinua Achebe in his seminal text, *Things Fall Apart*, had used the image of 'locusts' to refer to the coming of the White man to the coming of locusts- "They settled on every tree and every blade of grass, they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground; Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became brown-earth colour of the vast hungry swarm"(53)

Achebe likens the coming of the White man to the swarm of locusts who, descend upon every possible surface and break the mighty tree of African culture and tradition. Here too it is to be noted that the tree signifies ancient culture just like the way the poet Awoonor had referred it to be.

In another poem, 'Easter Dawn' Awoonor very poignantly points out that his ancestral gods are crying for a final burial, but those of them who should build shrines for their gods are stripping off their robes to don the new robes and sing the songs of the new religion. The religious symbolism comes from the images like, ritual, gods, shrines and Gethesemane. Those of them who were singing old songs for old gods are now singing new songs.

The gods are crying, my father's gods are crying
For a burial-for a final ritual-
But they that should build the fallen shrines
Have joined the dawn marchers
Singing their way towards Gethesemane (93)

In the poem, 'The Sea Eats the Land at Home', he employs the 'sea' image to describe the coming of the White man using the sea as the passage. Home is the African land which has been swallowed by the sea. The sea erodes the land shearing it off the African identity.

The sea eats the land at home

It has taken away their belongings
In the sea that eats the land at home
Eats the whole land at home(92)

In the poem, 'We Have Found a New Land', the poet uses the 'New Land' as an image to represent the new found Western identity by his countrymen. The natives have started imitating the life style of the Westerners and taking up the jobs which made them wear three piece suits, as they are new to this culture, they felt uncomfortable and uneasy. Yet, they clung on to the new culture and turned their land into a new land. He laments over how his people have taken up a new religion, new identity and new culture by forgetting their own roots. The adverse effects of colonialism are referred to in this poem as his eyes well with tears and his heart moans over the old land giving way to the new land.

The smart professionals in three piece
Sweating away their humanity in driblets
And wiping the blood from their brow
We have found a new land
This side of eternity
Where our blackness does not matter
And our songs are dying on our lips
And tears in my eyes well for them (147)

"Gerald Moore observes that Awoonor's poetry abounds in laments for the neglected shrines and forgotten gods, ignored by a society now intent upon individual status and materialism"

In 'Rediscovery' we come across these lines:

My god of songs was ill
And I was taking him to be cured

When I went the fetish priest was away

So, I waited outside the hut

My god of songs was groaning , crying

Then the bells rang and my name was called thrice

The poet feels anguished over the near death of his old tradition, which is reiterated in the above lines. The old gods are crying as they have been forgotten and neglected. Finally, the poet wants to take up the responsibility on himself to revive the dying culture. He takes the god of songs who is ill, to be cured to the fetish priest.

Take him to your father's god he said in my tongue

So I took him to my father's god

But before they opened the hut

My god burst into songs, new strong songs

That I am still singing with him.

As advised, when he took his god of songs to his father's god, the god revived himself and burst into songs. The ancestors and the ancestral gods are very significant in the African tradition. The last two lines mark the return of the poet to his roots, all these days he was also influenced by the western culture and traditions. His mourning, lamentations his pain over the loss of African identity and consciousness is well documented in his poems. He clearly understood that, to mark a reentry into his culture, he needs to understand his roots, reclaim the knowledge of his tradition and trace the journey towards it by way of his songs.

References

Achebe chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, Penguin Random House, UK (2001)

Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (ed), *Modern African Poetry*, Penguin Books.

London: (1963)

enanu .K.E. and T.Vincent. Long. (ed) *Selection of African Poetry*. London: Man group

(1976)